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ABSTRACT

A review of the difficulties Spanish-Americans and Mexican-Americans encounter in learning English, caused by a lack of knowledge of common idioms and figures of speech in current usage, leads to a discussion of two pilot studies in which the frequency of occurrence of idiomatic and figurative constructions in the reading materials presented to ninth grade classes in Texas and New Mexico is determined. Another experiment involving a class of 15 students, tested for linguistic proficiency in English and taught idioms and figures of speech for six weeks through various innovative approaches, is examined. (RL)

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Teaching Idioms and Figures of Speech to Non-Native Speakers of English

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ALONG the border of Mexico from the southernmost tip of Texas to the Pacific coast in California lies a two thousand-mile strip of land which presents one of the greatest single problems in education faced by the United States today. This is the territory designated as "the Southwest," comprising the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California. The area is a problem chiefly because within it are large numbers of individuals of Spanish American or Mexican American descent whose first-learned language is Spanish. The children of this region are caught between two worlds—one a familiar world of the Spanish spoken in their homes, and the other an alien world of the English-language-oriented schoolroom. While these children are often termed "bilinguals" by their teachers, they are far from being bilingual. They are non-native speakers of English.

The problems attendant upon teaching them English with methods and materials designed for monolingual English-speaking pupils are

tremendous. Their culturally different backgrounds influence the learning of the students. Although progress has been made in the linguistic areas, the obstacles preventing comprehensive effective learning have not been overcome.

Charles T. Scott has stated that learning English as a second language "involves far more than simply learning the forms of the language: its significant sounds, its words, and the permissible sequences in which those sounds and words can occur. He added "that full and effective communication in a second language presupposes not only a knowledge of *how* things are said in that language, but also *what* is said."¹

Scott theorized that idioms and figures of speech in the English language presented puzzles to the non-native student, resulting in the laborious exercise of working them out

¹ Charles T. Scott, "Literature and the ESL Program," *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 8 (December, 1964), p. 489.

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rather than being able to comprehend and enjoy the material for itself or for its ability to convey vicariously a particular cultural experience.

In addition to defining the problem of the second-language student learning English, there is a need to be precise in setting forth operational definitions of specific terminology. For the purpose of this specific writing, the terms employed may be defined as follows:

Non-native speaker: one whose first-learned language is not English.

Idioms: modes of expression or phrases which are peculiar to a given language. They are the basis for understanding the language, since they constitute a large part of it. They are rarely translated literally and often the dictionary is of little aid in the determination of the meaning of a particular expression. Such examples as "to make a beeline for," meaning to take the shortest route, and "to be short-handed," meaning to have insufficient help, are typical examples of idioms which cannot be understood from their grammatical construction. Other idioms are composed of verbs and prepositions, such as "to fill in," meaning to substitute for or to complete the blanks on a form, or composed of verbs and adverbs such as to "look forward," meaning to anticipate. Idioms have meanings other than the customary meanings of the words which compose them.

Figurative language: Language which is not literal, often employing metaphor. While no attempt was made to list examples of figurative language by types of classification, it should be noted that in the term "figure of speech" or "figurative language" are such examples as simile, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole.

We have vocabulary lists prepared by Thorndike-Lorge or by Michael West as indications of frequency of occurrence of words. It is difficult to find tabulations for syntactic structures or for idiomatic constructs. Any attempt to simplify the grammatical structures of our reading materials for foreign students, bilingual students or non-native speakers in the United States has been subjectively that of the individual writer.

Solomon Weiner, author of *Modismos Americanos*, a book of idioms and figures of speech found in English, states in his foreward that his book has been written to fill a great void that is left by most methods of teaching the English language. He adds that the omission is incomprehensible to him, as the English language is so idiomatic and figurative, and these expressions constitute the heart of the language, giving it color, feeling, charm and precision.¹

Robert J. Dixon, in compiling idioms a decade ago, remarked that his was apparently the first approach to the teaching of idioms by means of extensive practice exercises.²

His concern was with the teaching of English to non-native speakers and he added that his experience had shown that his students found the meanings confusing and elusive, as they could not be translated directly from their native tongue.

A student may learn grammar and acquire sufficient vocabulary to communicate, but without a working knowledge of such expressions as our idiomatic "to put out, to get along, to call for, to look up, to look over," and hundreds of others, his spoken and written English will remain stilted and foreign-sounding. His reading will be appreciably slower and his comprehension will suffer. For these specified reasons the teaching of idioms and figures of speech should not be neglected, but should be made a part of the study of grammar and vocabulary for those students who learn English as a second language.

In order to substantiate this belief, a pilot study was conducted in two high schools, one in El Paso, Texas, and one in Gadsden, New Mexico. The purpose was primarily to determine the frequency of occurrence of idiomatic and figurative constructions in the reading materials presented to ninth grade students in the two states. If a preliminary investigation revealed a sufficient number to warrant further study, then the comprehension of the non-native speakers of English was to be determined by testing. If test results indicated a lack of understanding of idioms and figures of speech by the students, the final portion of the

¹ Solomon Weiner, *Modismos Americanos*, New York: Handy Book Press, Inc., 1958.

² Robert J. Dixon, *Essential Idioms in English*, New York: Regents Publishing Company, 1951.

pilot study would be to determine, as simply as possible, if a teaching method could be devised to achieve positive results.

The basal reader adopted for the seventh grade level by the state of Texas was examined for the purpose of determining by frequency count the number of idiomatic and figurative expressions included in random samples of the material. The state-adopted seventh grade basal reader for New Mexico was then examined in a similar manner in order to provide a larger sample.

The basal readers on the seventh grade level were selected for investigation because this level of reading is that which is used with ninth grade non-native English-speaking students in both the El Paso Public Schools and the Independent School District of Gadsden, New Mexico. Interviews and personal correspondence with school administrators and authorities in both the Texas and New Mexico areas verified that ninth grade level students who spoke English as a second language were often as many as two to three years retarded in English and reading. Special sections for these students have been established in the two communities. Students are placed in these sections by principals and teachers because it is felt that they can no longer be "socially promoted" with their lack of reading achievement.

Since a preliminary investigation of the reading material used by ninth grade pupils in the two high schools revealed that basal readers and social studies materials contained an average of 3.32 idioms and figures of speech per page, an average textbook of four hundred pages contained a sufficient frequency of occurrence of these expressions to question the quality of comprehension.

Tests were constructed to assess this understanding. The results of testing revealed that idioms and figures of speech, while constituting a meaningful part of the English with which students must cope, are not readily understood. The students were deficient in their knowledge of such structures to the point of being handicapped in the ability to comprehend the contexts in which the constructions appeared.

The conclusion is that serious and extensive research is needed to determine how best to teach non-native speakers of English the use of idiomatic and figurative speech. If it is

apparent that the desired educational goal is obtainable, we will more easily obtain financial support for such an undertaking.

An investigation, therefore, was needed to determine, in as simple as possible a manner, whether or not the direct teaching of such constructions was practical. The teaching method used, based on existing theory and on the experience I have had in teaching pupils English as a second language, was rigidly simplified. The scope of the investigation itself was quite limited. Only students whose native language was Spanish and who were learning English as a second language were included. Only the students in the high school in El Paso, Texas were included in this study; the distance separating the pupils in New Mexico was a factor. The criterion for selection was the question, "What language is spoken in your home?" All spoke only Spanish in the home environment. According to their teachers all were reading at two years behind their normal grade level for reading achievement. This factor was carefully limited and should be understood in terms of the limitations.

The normal procedure of the ninth grade classes in El Paso and in Gadsden appeared to ignore the idiom and figure of speech unless a student asked a specific question. It must be pointed out that second language students are too shy and embarrassed to ask the necessary questions for understanding. This is an experiential observation and not a mere conjecture of one who is a native of Texas and a resident of El Paso for some forty-odd years. When idioms or figurative language were considered in the reading material of the students, they were simply explained in the context and then hurriedly passed over. No attempt was made to reinforce meaning, to interpret systematically all idioms encountered, or to give students general concepts of what idioms and figurative language are. Since there are so many different idioms and so much figurative language in the written material the student encounters, it would seem wise to attempt to do more than just teach the meaning of a few given constructions. Lado has presented the problem of increasing the vocabulary of non-native speakers by citing the fact that the normal English-speaking first-grade child in the United States knows some 16,900 basic words and that

twelfth grade students have a vocabulary of about 80,000 basic and derived words.⁴

Second-language learners have a real problem of catching up. Similarly, they have a problem of catching up in regard to idiomatic and figurative language. In the space of a few months in a given class, the few idioms a teacher may be expected to teach will not make a great difference in the understanding of the student. These would likely be those constructions in the new material that he encounters. It is of far more value to give the student a broad understanding of the nature of idiomatic and figurative language and to encourage his guessing at the meaning from the context.

There are many audio-visual aids which are effective in the teaching of any area of language. Among these are the 16mm movie sound projector, the 35mm filmstrip and slide projector, the tape recorder, the opaque projector, and the record player. Unfortunately, such equipment is unavailable in a great many public school classrooms, particularly in the border areas of Texas and New Mexico. When such audio-visual aids are not readily obtainable, the teacher must rely upon the direct teaching of specific idioms and figures of speech and of the use of such constructions as language elements. This method involves dictionary drill for lexical meaning, a distinction made between lexical and figurative meaning, a discussion of the language element in its context in the material, the oral use of the expression by the student in his own context, and the written use of the expression in sentence and paragraph.

Dialogue is very effective in teaching idioms and figures of speech, for here the student uses the expression in a casual and conversational manner. He learns to incorporate the element into his own vocabulary. Dialogues may be furnished by the instructor or written by the more advanced students for use in the classroom. These methods have been found by personal experience to be helpful in teaching English as a second language.

The basic experiment conducted for teaching and testing purposes for this study entailed a period of six weeks and involved a class of fifteen students previously tested for their comprehension of idioms and figurative speech. The weekly publication, *Current Events*, was

used because it was already available to the class.⁵ It was customarily distributed to the pupils on each Friday during the Language Arts period. Generally it was read by the students and the questions under "Review and Discussion" were answered orally. In the El Paso classroom under study, no particular consideration was given to particular language elements such as idioms and figures of speech, although tabulations revealed that this publication contained many idiomatic and figurative expressions.

To establish a new approach to the teaching of the material in *Current Events*, the teacher summarized the news item. The students were then asked to read the story silently. After this reading, the vocabulary was discussed and students were encouraged to ask questions about the story. They were asked to relate any experiences in the news item to their own actual experiences. This was an attempt to incorporate these elements of language which do not ordinarily form a part of their language into their personal vocabularies. Although the response was very limited, this was a beginning to the student's use of idiomatic and figurative speech in casual and running conversation.

The students used the dictionary to find the lexical meanings of the words in the news stories which also had figurative meanings. They were directed to note the changed meanings in the idiomatic and figurative elements.

Each of the students was required to use at least one of the expressions found in the stories in a context of his own. He then wrote a sentence on the blackboard illustrating this use, which further reinforced this learning for the entire group. Finally, the students originated a story in a continued progression, each pupil adding the successive idiomatic or figurative structure used in the *Current Events* news story. The original story continued around the classroom until all of the expressions had been considered. This constituted an oral reinforcement as well as an oral testing of their understanding of the expressions and their correct usage.

This procedure was continued for five weeks

⁴ Robert Lado, *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964, p. 140.

⁵ *Current Events*, Middletown, Connecticut: American Education Publications, Inc., 1965-1966.

in successive daily sessions with a different news story each week. The meaning of idiomatic and figurative constructions was repeatedly pointed out and distinguished from the lexical meaning. The students were stimulated in this exercise and consistently presented comparisons in the Spanish language which were similar to the English expressions. Several students admitted that they had not known that English had such language elements as Spanish had. They had therefore, always attempted to translate literally from English in their reading. Needless to say, they had never attempted to use these orally in free conversation.

A test conducted in the sixth week was designated to determine if this approach to the teaching of idioms and figures of speech was effective. Sixteen idiomatic and figurative constructions were selected from the news reader for the current week. The fifteen students were asked to write their interpretations of the meanings of these language elements. Very few of the sixteen idiomatic and figurative expressions had been encountered by the students in the previous five weeks.

No attempt was made to explain the meanings prior to the testing. The expressions were read aloud by the investigator and the pupils wrote the answers on prepared forms. This procedure followed the method used in the original testing of the comprehension of idioms and figurative language. The results were then tabulated and the findings are recorded in Table I.

TABLE I
POST-TEST SCORES AFTER INTENSIVE TEACHING

Subjects	* N Correct Responses	Percent
1	14	87
1	13	81
3	12	75
2	11	68
3	10	62
2	9	58
1	8	50
2	7	43

* 16 = 100%

The mean score for the class was 10.33. The median score was 10.0. Fifteen students answered correctly 155 times from a possible total of 240 correct responses. This is an average of 64.6 percent correct answers. A comparison with the original test result on comprehension reveals the following:

TABLE II
PRE-TEST SCORES

Subjects	* N Correct Responses	Percent
1	50	67
1	48	64
1	42	56
1	40	53
1	37	49
1	36	48
1	33	44
2	30	40
1	28	37
2	27	36
1	24	32
1	14	19
1	11	15

* 75 = 100%

The mean score of the fifteen students tested for comprehension of idioms and figures of speech before any intensive training was 31.8. The median score was 30.7. The percentage of responses answered correctly was 37.3 or a total of 420 correct answers from a possible 1125 correct. Comparison of the preliminary test with the second test result shows an improvement for this group of from 37.3 to 64.6 percent. This is an increase of 27.3 percent.

Without pretending to any degree of sophistication, the three steps in this investigation provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate the practicability of formal methods of instruction in idiomatic and figurative language structures. Rather than regard the non-native speaker of English as slow or retarded, we must construct his educational program to meet his needs. His language needs are other than those designed for our native speakers of English.